

## Chapter 22

### "Declaration of Independence"

(1776)  
Thomas Jefferson

#### Introduction

Written by Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration marked the official separation of the thirteen colonies from the British Empire. Jefferson sought to justify America's actions to the world in his brief listing of Britain's crimes. Most of Jefferson's contemporaries focused on this list of grievances, but the Declaration's general political statements would cause a great deal of trouble for established elites as different groups struggled to extend its promise of freedom and equality to themselves. In the nineteenth century, leading conservatives from Rufus Choate to Stephen Douglas mocked and derided Jefferson's language, but Abraham Lincoln succeeded in convincing most Americans that the Declaration deserved to be considered one of the founding documents of this nation.

#### Questions to Consider

- What were the crimes of George III, and does he merit all the blame?
- Does the language of the Declaration still have resonance?

---

In Congress July 4, 1776

The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of Government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. -Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world:

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in

1 their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to  
2 attend to them.

3  
4 He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people  
5 would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable  
6 to tyrants only.

7  
8 He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository  
9 of their Public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

10  
11 He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on  
12 the rights of the people.

13  
14 He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the  
15 Legislative Powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the  
16 State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions  
17 within.

18  
19 He has endeavored to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws of  
20 Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migration hither, and raising the  
21 conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

22  
23 He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary  
24 Powers.

25  
26 He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and  
27 payment of their salaries.

28  
29 He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our People, and  
30 eat out their substance.

31  
32 He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislature.

33  
34 He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil Power.

35  
36 He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and  
37 unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their acts of pretended legislation:

38  
39 For quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

40  
41 For protecting them, by mock Trial, from Punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the  
42 Inhabitants of these States:

43  
44 For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

45  
46 For imposing taxes on us without our Consent:

47  
48 For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

49  
50 For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offenses:

1 For abolishing the free System of English laws in a neighboring Province, establishing therein an  
2 Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit  
3 instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

4  
5 For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms  
6 of our Governments:

7  
8 For suspending our own Legislature, and declaring themselves invested with Power to legislate for us in  
9 all cases whatsoever.

10  
11 He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

12  
13 He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

14  
15 He is at this time transporting large armies of foreign mercenaries to complete the works of death,  
16 desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in  
17 the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

18  
19 He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country,  
20 to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

21  
22 He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our  
23 frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is undistinguished destruction of all  
24 ages, sexes and conditions.

25  
26 In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our  
27 repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked  
28 by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free People.

29  
30 Nor have We been wanting in attention to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time  
31 of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them  
32 of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and  
33 magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these  
34 usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been  
35 deaf to the voice of justice and consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which  
36 denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace  
37 Friends.

38  
39 We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress Assembled,  
40 appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by  
41 the Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United  
42 Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all  
43 Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great  
44 Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full  
45 Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and  
46 Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm  
47 reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes  
48 and our sacred Honor.

49  
50 John Hancock (et.al.)